

ISRAEL BACK TO "NORMAL"

An Informal Report

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IN ISRAEL these days, understandably enough, there is no escaping discussions of international politics. When I was there in March, everyone was still talking about the Sinai campaign, and it was only just being fully recognized that the Anglo-French intervention in Suez, far from helping Israel, had saved Nasser. The feeling was also beginning to be widespread that the Israeli campaign should never have been launched if such intervention seemed likely. Most Israelis knew that Ben Gurion had no choice but to order the subsequent retreat from Sinai, Gaza, and Sharm el Sheikh; nevertheless, there was bitter disappointment when he finally took the step. And the attitude of America—still regarded as a friend—was and continues to be more disheartening to Israel than the hostility of the Soviet Union, from whom nothing better is expected.

Indeed, popular disappointment over the retreat was so great that, according to some observers, if a general election had been held early in 1957, the right-wing Herut party—whose leader, Menachem Beigin, denounced the government for betraying the country's interests—would have come to power. But there are those who say that Herut is no serious contender for power—it inevitably battens on the mistakes and failures of government policy and capitalizes on popular discontent. Beigin and his follow-

ers may not be the fascists or semi-fascists their opponents always accuse them of being, but they are certainly a negative party, the most anti-Arab group in Israel, with nothing to offer but sweeping slogans in the field of foreign policy, and an unreal domestic program.

At first, most Israelis were convinced that the Sinai campaign would remove the danger of war for a couple of years, but now only a handful of hardy optimists expects the peace to last longer than a few more months. Nor can anyone understand why both Hammer-skjold and Dulles fail to realize that a policy of appeasing the Arabs can only lead right on to a new war—over Sharm el Sheikh or some other issue. Yet there is very little that Israel can do about European dependence on Middle Eastern oil, which will remain a factor influencing Western policy in favor of the Arabs for at least another ten or fifteen years.

But is there very little that Israel can do about Soviet Russian enmity toward herself? Opinion is divided on the question. There are people around who point out that another sudden change in Soviet foreign policy—in this case, from hostility to friendship for Israel—should not be precluded. Many members of Mapam (the left-wing Socialist party) are firmly convinced that such a change of heart will come about when the Kremlin realizes that its policy in the Middle East represents a deviation from the sacred principles of proletarian internationalism. Another, more heterogeneous, group thinks that the Russians may in the end drop Nasser as a bad bet in view of his military and economic impotence and his doubtful attachment to the Soviet bloc. But Israelis who are somewhat better informed than Mapam ideologues or than the believers in simple *Real-*

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politik are for the most part persuaded that nothing can be done about Soviet hostility. They argue that since there is no free press or independent public opinion in Russia, Israel has no way of appealing to the Soviet people over the heads of its anti-Semitic rulers, and hence no way of bringing pressure to bear on the Kremlin.

This attitude, superficially plausible, is nevertheless basically mistaken. For the Soviet leaders are very sensitive, if not to what their own people think, then to Western public opinion—especially at a time like the present when they are attempting to re-create the “spirit of Geneva.” In this context Israel could have great nuisance value and could exert considerable political pressure on Moscow by giving wide publicity to the desperate situation of Jews in Russia and to the aggressive intentions of Soviet policy in the Middle East. The failure to exploit this opportunity has perhaps been the most fateful omission in Israeli foreign policy. The Soviet Union has grown more and more hostile, but Israel has steadily refrained from effective political counter-action. Successive Israeli foreign ministers have done little more in this connection than complain over and over again to Alexander N. Abramov, the Soviet envoy, of Russia’s unrelenting hostility, while trying to persuade him of Israel’s friendly intentions. All this has been noted before, but it was only during my visit to Jerusalem, a few months ago, that some of the reasons for Israel’s ineptitude in dealing with the Russians became clear to me.

FOR one thing, many of the old illusions about the Soviet Union are still current in Israel—most widely, of course, on the left, where the lessons of both Khrushchev’s revelations about Stalin and of the Hungarian revolution have been learned only in part and with great reluctance. True, the Communists (to include them for a moment among the parties of the left) are more or less ignored by a Knesset which feels that there is no longer any common ground of discussion with men like Shmuel Mikunis, Moshe Sneh, or Tawfig Toubi. Two or three

years ago, when these members rose to speak, a storm of protest generally greeted them; today they say their piece in absolute silence. Though a splinter Communist group has recently founded a new periodical called *D'rachim Chadashot* (“New Ways”) which betrays Polish inspiration both in name (*Nowe Drogi*—also meaning “New Ways”—is the Polish party’s main theoretical journal) and content, the hard core is still willing to justify any line handed down from Moscow.*

It is also true that most of the rank and file, and probably a majority of the party leaders, of the traditionally fellow-traveling Mapam have been completely disillusioned by Khrushchev’s revelations, the Soviet invasion of Budapest, and Moscow’s anti-Jewish policies; unfortunately their disaffection is reflected only in private conversation. When it comes to public declarations or editorials in the party press, little change is noticeable. Mapam has been less outspoken in its condemnation of Soviet actions than Pietro Nenni in Italy or Jean-Paul Sartre in France, apparently fearing that it would have to repudiate socialism if its confidence in the Soviet Union were shattered. The

*When I did some research a few years ago into the history of the Communist party of Palestine, I found that the entire leadership and most of the rank and file who had belonged to the party before 1937 had simply disappeared. Some had been deported by the British to East Europe, others had gone to Russia of their own free will, and some had found their way to Moscow via Spain during the Civil War. Nobody could tell me what had become of these men and women: there were only vague rumors of trials and executions, and a report that the *kolkhoz* “Via Nuova” (founded in the Crimea by ex-kibbutzniks) had been dissolved around 1939. During 1956-57, most of the Palestinian Communists who had survived the ensuing years in Russia (less than a quarter of the several hundred who had originally gone there), and some of the children of those who had died in Nazi concentration camps, returned to Israel. A fairly complete picture of their history then emerged. It was learned, for example, that Yitzhak Meirson (d. 1947), the founder of the Palestine Communist movement, and Shelesniak-Barzilai-Berger, the party’s general secretary during the late 20’s, embraced Orthodox Judaism as a result of their Russian experience. The stories of the others are no less fascinating, but it would take a book to relate them in detail.

nonsensical idea that a socialist *must* support the "basically socialist and anti-imperialist" Soviet Union has been repeated so often by the party stalwarts over the last decade that in the end it has come to be believed.

Under the influence of this way of thinking, Mapam officially continues to support Soviet policies and goes on cooperating both with the Communists (outside Israel), and with various front organizations (such as the "Partisans of Peace," the WFTU, the world youth movement, etc., etc.), while tending to regard Russia's present hostility to Israel as a temporary aberration.

As for Ahdut Avoda, the other left-wing group in the Knesset, it has learned rather more than Mapam from the events of 1956. The party's distrust of Soviet intentions in the Middle East is now as strong as its opposition to "American imperialist policies," and it currently takes its political cues not from Moscow but from the left-wing socialist groups in Britain, France, and Italy.

ILLUSIONS on the left, however, form only a part—and perhaps not the most significant part—of the reason that Israel's dealings with Russia have been so naive and ineffectual. What may be more important is the poverty of reliable information about international affairs available to the Israeli public. It is the quality of the Israeli press and radio and the character of the foreign publications circulated in the country that together account for the ill-informed state of public opinion.

Weeklies have never prospered in Israel, and those in existence today compare rather unfavorably both in make-up and content even with their Egyptian counterparts. The Israeli dailies, though they only amount to four pages, used to be competent, but they too have deteriorated, largely because they lack money and circulation (only one paper sells more than 50,000 copies a day). Most Israeli dailies are subsidized by political parties, and they do little more than advance the party point of view. Since salaries in journalism are very low, and the profession has little prestige, it does not attract enough

young men of ability. Tocqueville once remarked that experience in journalism was a prerequisite to a political career in France, whereas in Britain it constituted a major impediment. If that is so, Israel is very British in this respect.

Lack of funds is even more strongly felt in the state-owned Israeli radio. In most other Middle Eastern countries, the tendency has been to expand radio and television facilities, but in Israel, where the tremendous importance of mass communication is almost completely ignored, one government after another has tried to cut the broadcasting budget. As a result, Radio Israel, once a leading influence in the Middle East, today trails behind broadcasting in Egypt and other Arab countries. Baghdad already has a television station and Cairo and Damascus will follow suit this year, while the main problem in Israel is how to prevent further cuts in radio alone. Radio Israel has to manage on a fraction of the sum available to the Cairo "Voice of the Arabs," which operates with a budget only slightly smaller than that of the BBC.

The quality of the programs has naturally suffered from this scarcity of funds. On a typical Sabbath morning, an Israeli who turns on his radio in quest of intelligent discussion of momentous world affairs is likely to be greeted with a talk on the incidence of stomach cancer, then one on recent developments in Israel's chemical industry, followed by long and tiresome readings from poems and novels.

It is not surprising, then, that many Israelis turn to foreign books, magazines, and newspapers to get the information they need. All too often, however, they read the wrong publications. Partly this is the fault of the importers who, not surprisingly, would rather bring in lighter magazines that are sure to sell than serious publications that may moulder on the rack. But the taste of the Israeli reading public—which is so conservative that it will give up a familiar writer or periodical only with the greatest reluctance—is also to blame. The paradox is that Israelis, given a choice between an unfamiliar

friendly publication and a familiar hostile one, frequently take the latter.* (Partly, this is explained by the fact that the familiar publication is often the one expressing the traditional left position, which has been the position of many Israelis, even though the traditional left ranges for the most part from cool to hostile in its attitude toward Israel's difficulties with the Arab world.)

This is a matter of greater political importance than appears on the surface. The impact of periodicals from London, Paris, and New York is far greater in Delhi, Beirut, or Jerusalem than in their own countries, for the simple reason that they constitute the local intelligentsia's main ties with the political and cultural centers of the world. The influence on Israeli thinking of the London *New Statesman* or of a political journalist like Isaac Deutscher—each of whom has a decidedly slanted view toward world affairs and the nature of the Soviet regime—can hardly be overrated, and this influence extends to the highest levels of the Foreign Ministry. Such sources may be one-sided, they may have been proved wrong many times, but, since nothing better is known, dependence on them remains strong. Hence the oblique perspective that often distorts the interpretation of world affairs in Israel.

But along with the illusions of Mapam and the scant availability of hard-headed political journalism, the organizational structure of both the Foreign Ministry and the Israeli information service also plays its part in the ineptitude of Israel's approaches to the Russians. It is an open secret that important foreign policy decisions are nowadays made, not by the Foreign Ministry, but by the Prime Minister, with the help

of advice from a few aides, some of them not of the highest administrative rank. Since Golda Meir has spent much of her time abroad in recent months, the Foreign Ministry has not always been adequately briefed on what was going on. This is not to say that an increase in the authority of the Foreign Ministry would necessarily produce a better foreign policy. But as matters stand, only the most serious problems (peace or war, relations with Washington, etc., etc.) are given careful consideration, and many other important questions, including Israel's attitude toward the Communist bloc, are simply left in abeyance.

Similarly, deficient organization is responsible for much that is wrong with the Israeli information service. It lacks a central office to coordinate the work of the various agencies in the field which are responsible for trying to win sympathy for the Israeli cause in foreign countries. Those who in the past tried to introduce improvements along this line failed, and it is doubtful whether anyone could succeed under the present circumstances.

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WHAT about the domestic scene? Returning after an absence of two years, I found life to be pretty much the same. There were changes, of course: many new houses had sprung up in the streets of Jerusalem; people were generally better tempered than before (a state of emergency always seems to bring out the best in a man). But the sabras hadn't changed—all of them still looked a head taller than their European parents and very handsome to boot. Passers-by in the street still stared at you with a frank, appraising inquisitiveness inconceivable in London or Paris. On the whole, everyone was still shabbily clothed compared with people in most West European countries; Jerusalem, with its many government employees and with 15 per cent of the population on relief, looked particularly poor. (On the other hand, Tel Aviv, especially northern Tel Aviv, strikes one as comfortable and prosperous.) Though

*To give a few examples: *Time* has a circulation of thousands but hardly anyone has ever heard of the *Reporter* (let alone the *New Republic* or the *New Leader*). The London *Observer* and the *New Statesman* are widely sold and read, yet the *Sunday Times*, the *Spectator*, and other British weeklies are nowhere to be found. *France Observateur* is distributed, the pro-Israeli *Demain* is not. This list could be expanded.

the shops were full and the austerity of 1949-52 definitely a thing of the past, prices were exorbitant, at least in relation to average wages.

The Israeli wage-earner's standard of living has been a problem for some time, but only in the last two years has it assumed serious dimensions.* While the very rich in Israel are subject to a lower income tax than their counterparts in the United States or Britain, a wage-earner in the middle income group (which by Israeli standards starts at about \$150 per month) pays so high a percentage of his salary away in taxes that he is often left with scarcely enough to make ends meet. The government's fiscal experts justify this policy by explaining that since so few Israelis are very rich, the state would be unable to collect the revenue it needs without heavy taxation on all levels. The result has been a growing polarization of living standards: there is hardly any style of life between affluence on the one side and penuriousness on the other. Under the British Mandate, Israeli society had a distinctly egalitarian character, but today there are great and growing discrepancies in income. One now sees evening dress, and week ends at the Sharon and other luxury hotels have become a regular feature of life in some circles. The elaborate Bar Mitzvah and wedding celebrations that have come into fashion among the wealthier groups are also a new phenomenon.

At the other end of the scale, there are those who tried very hard to live on what remained of their income after taxes, and who, having failed to get by without great struggle, decided to emigrate. The statistics are not alarming, and it can be taken for granted that a certain percentage will return some day after a protracted stay abroad. What should be a matter of great concern, however, is the character of this emigration. Many of the emigrants are members of the professions who came to Israel ten, twenty, or even thirty years ago, who

genuinely liked the country, and made the decision to leave with heavy hearts. One such couple I met were middle-aged people originally from Central Europe; they were preparing in despair to become immigrants for a second time in their lives. This couple had no illusions about what they would find in Canada or Brazil, but they were absolutely convinced they would never be able to get their heads above water in Israel. Objectively, their economic situation was no worse than it had been ten or twenty years before, but privation was easier to bear in 1937 or 1947, when everyone was poor and life was not considered intolerable without electric refrigerators and other such conveniences.

Though comparatively few Israelis want to leave the country for good, almost everyone wants to go abroad for at least a few weeks, and those who manage to do so are envied by the rest. This desire for travel comes not so much from the wish to escape political tension or the danger of war: one learns to live with crises of that kind after a few years. Recently, I visited a friend whose house was located close to a big military camp in the south. The constant shooting at the nearby rifle and machine-gun range made conversation practically impossible, but he seemed not to mind, and when I asked him how he could stand the racket, it turned out that he was not aware of the noise—so accustomed had he become to it. It is not fear of the Arabs, then, but fear of being cut off culturally from the rest of the world, of losing touch with the work being done in one's profession abroad—combined with an urge to break out for a while and see new faces and places—that stimulates the Israeli yearning for travel.

THE old tensions and conflicts, submerged during the Sinai campaign and its aftermath, returned to trouble the domestic scene: Israel is now back to normal. Early last January the Orthodox representatives in the Jerusalem municipality threatened to paralyze administration in the capital by their demands for the legal enforcement of

*See Oded Remba's "Can Israel Support Herself?" COMMENTARY, November 1956.

total Sabbath observance. In February the newspapers were full of stories about a Tel Aviv libel case in the course of which shady dealings high up in the government were exposed. In March Dr. Rudolf Kastner—who himself figured in a libel case three years ago that involved a “deal” he made with the Nazis in Budapest in 1944-45 to save Jews*—was shot by members of a small terrorist gang, and died some days later. In April the country was shocked by the news that the police were investigating a series of thefts committed by a fairly large group of Tel Aviv high school students. And there is the continuing trial of the police involved in the massacre of Arab villagers at Kfar Kasim on the eve of the Sinai campaign.

Of all these events, the conflict between the Orthodox groups and the rest of the Israeli populace is perhaps the least important at the moment, and the assassination of Kastner the most dramatic. None of the murderers—all of whom have apparently been arrested—was Hungarian and none had a personal grudge against him. They wanted the murder to serve as a warning to all “traitors,” and were trying to “do something to rouse the people from its lethargy.” The group, however, was too small to be politically significant.

But the libel suit brought by Mr. Amos Ben Gurion, a high officer in the Israeli police force and son of the Prime Minister, against an organization called *Shurat Hamitnadvim* (“Volunteers”) did have considerable political repercussions. *Shurat Hamitnadvim*—which consists mainly of students (many of them originally members of Mapai) and some influential well-wishers and supporters in the academic world and similar quarters—was founded several years ago for the purpose of helping and guiding new immigrants. But after a while the organization also began to carry out private investigations into cases of patronage and corruption in the government, getting its information from friends in government

offices. At first this expanded activity was generally welcomed by the public, and the “Volunteers” even received small grants from various official institutions to help them in their muckraking work. In the course of time, however, they came to neglect the less spectacular job of helping the new immigrants, and their investigations soon became the subject of violent dispute. They were charged with trying to establish themselves as a private police, and in the opinion of some observers, they were in danger of becoming a rallying point for anti-democratic forces. Historically-minded Israelis—who could recall how right-wing extremists in France attempted to overthrow the Third Republic in connection with government scandals, and how the Nazis and Communists exploited a series of trials to prove the “rottenness” of the Weimar Republic—were profoundly troubled. The dilemma was a real one, for the “Volunteers” had performed a useful service with their investigations. The irregularities revealed were perhaps unimpressive by the standards of other countries, but in tiny Israel where, as it were, everyone knows everyone else, such revelations assumed large proportions and made for much political disturbance.

ISRAEL in the spring of 1957 is in a state of crisis, torn by tension and conflict—but nothing could be further from the truth than the notion that her existence is in jeopardy. It is not an easy country to live in, and certainly not one to be recommended to those in search of a quiet life and material rewards. But there is a feeling of community and comradeship, an *esprit de corps*, greater perhaps than can be found anywhere else in the world. The domestic crises I have described are mostly normal growing pains, and the external pressures have only served to accelerate the consolidation of a mass of people from eighty different countries into a united nation. Instead of weakening the young Jewish state, the hostility of its Arab neighbors daily strengthens it—a fact that may well turn out to be one of the great ironies of our time.

*See my article “The Kastner Case,” in COMMENTARY, December 1955.